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ARCHITECTURE

A gallery of rogues

For every gem produced by the long-running building boom, there are even more clunkers

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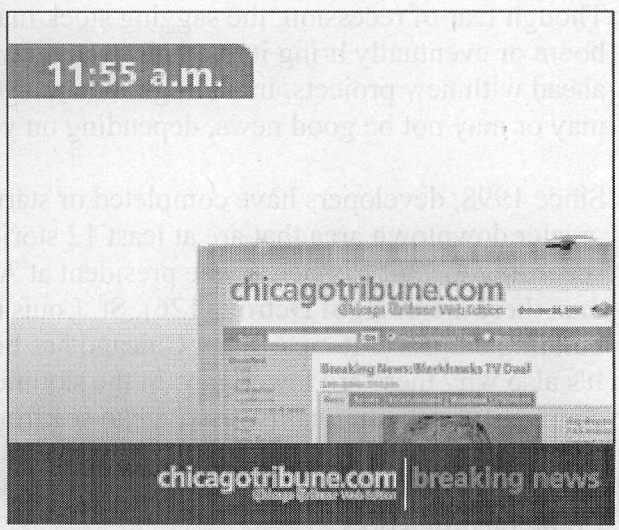

There is the ideal Chicago, the showcase city glimpsed on the Chicago River boat tour that glides past the Wrigley Building and other glorious skyscrapers. And then there is the real Chicago, a Dickensian construction zone where it is simultaneously the best and the worst of times.

Come see it, if you dare.

On North Michigan Avenue, shoe-horned behind the marvelous mountainous mass of the InterContinental Chicago hotel, there's Avenue East, an orange-and-white hulk done in the colors of a Creamsicle. Just north of McCormick Place stands Museum Park Place, a stubby slab that addresses South Lake Shore Drive with a superscale tic-tac-toe grid in screeching red.

Farther north on the Drive, in the big Lakeshore East project, there's the Lancaster, a tinselly glass tower that looks like it dropped in from China. And then, on East Chicago Avenue, you stumble upon the Bernardin, a postmodern cartoon with a parking garage base wrapped in a comically bad, neo-Italianate stage-set, right down to the keystones above faux windows.

This rogues gallery of condominium and apartment towers, all either new or completed in the last few years, reveal a trend that Chicago's boosters will find hard to swallow: For every authentic gem produced by the long-running building boom, such as Helmut Jahn's quietly elegant condo tower at 600 N. Fairbanks, there are more gewgaws -- structures that offend not only because they're poorly designed but also because they erode the city's extraordinary sense of place.

It has been nearly five years since Mayor Richard M. Daley attacked an earlier wave of exposed-concrete apartment and condominium towers that resembled monotonous, Soviet-style housing and issued his headline-generating "no more ugly buildings" edict. But while city planners have improved

their review procedures since then, no bureaucrat can legislate good design.

And so, we are confronted with irreversible visual carnage, as on South Lake Shore Drive, where drivers gazing out the windshield have their choice of dueling architectural train wrecks. On one side of the highway is Soldier Field, which resembles the Starship Enterprise crash-landed atop the Parthenon. On the other side stands a crazy quilt of structures -- mock classical, mock Prairie, Dallas Freeway Modern -- that doesn't come close to competing with the clifflike power of North Lake Shore Drive's range of high-rises. Yes, the new ones are selling like hot cakes, but real estate success has never looked so cheap.

The bigger story in all this reaches beyond Chicago to boomtowns across America and the world: This is a time of urbanization without urbanity; of star architects who are their own brands, not the standard-bearers of larger movements; of idiosyncratic, do-your-own-thing "icon buildings," not broadly accepted norms that generate satisfying cityscapes.

"Individualism is emphasized to a greater extent now," said Neil Harris, professor emeritus of art history at the University of Chicago and author of "Chicago Apartments: A Century of Lakefront Luxury," an authoritative study of Lake Shore Drive's historic apartment high-rises. "Why should buildings be any different?"

Though fear of recession, the sagging stock market and an oversupply of units could slow the building boom or eventually bring it to a halt, many developers at least publicly maintain that they will forge ahead with new projects, including the Santiago Calatrava-designed, 2,000-foot Chicago Spire. That may or may not be good news, depending on your threshold for architectural mediocrity.

Since 1998, developers have completed or started construction on more than 160 buildings in Chicago's greater downtown area that are at least 12 stories tall (the widely accepted definition of a high-rise), according to Gail Lissner, a vice president at Appraisal Research Counselors. That's more high-rises than there are in all of Detroit (126), St. Louis (105) or Milwaukee (83), according to the Emporis building database. It means that Chicago has built the equivalent of an entire downtown in just 10 years. It's also why there are fewer gaps in the skyline than there used to be. This thickening, though, is hardly commensurate with quality, as you can see from a snapshot contrast of elegant North Lake Shore Drive and its ugly-duckling counterpart to the south.

Commonality works

Why is it better up north? As Harris points out, the apartment towers that went up along the Drive in the 1920s were built in proximity so they had the effect of imitating a cliff. Their styles ran the gamut from neo-Gothic to neo-Renaissance Revival, but they shared a common scale and common materials (brick, limestone and other masonry). So they constituted something of a family where the whole was more than the sum of the individual parts.

"Those buildings helped one another," Harris said. "They fit. It was almost as if they had been designed by the same architect."

But it's a different story down south at Central Station, the dormitory-like, vertical suburb that's taking shape on 80 acres of formerly abandoned rail yards that stretch southward from Roosevelt Road. The workhorse Chicago firm of Pappageorge/Haymes is one of Central Station's chief architects and its initial efforts have been desultory.

The 20-story Museum Park Tower 1 and the 21-story Museum Park Tower 2 borrow crudely from the

classicism of the nearby Museum Campus. And the towers are placed in a staggered arrangement that opens views from within their condominium units but fails to form a continuous streetwall.

As if to compensate for the stodgy classicism of these buildings, the firm's just-completed 23-story Museum Park Place flaunts an aggressive red supergrid, which expresses the building's structure. The result is a "look-at-me" one-liner, the kind of thing you'd expect to see along a freeway in Houston or Dallas. While there are some good strokes here, such as townhouses at the tower's base that match the scale of brick townhouses across the street, even Daley's design guru bemoans the results.

"It's a huge missed opportunity in many ways along Lake Shore Drive," said Sam Assefa, the mayor's deputy chief of staff for economic and physical development.

Strives to do better

The other big residential project now materializing along the Drive, Lakeshore East, has its own aesthetic problems as Jim Loewenberg, the chief and co-developer of the widely panned concrete hulks in River North, strives to do better -- and succeeds, but only so much.

Give this sunken 28-acre parcel near the Aon Center its due: It's got a handsome 6-acre contemporary park at its core and it is drawings thousands of residents to once-fallow downtown land. But the architecture couldn't be spottier.

Along Columbus Drive, you see architect Jeanne Gang's 82-story, underconstruction Aqua tower, with its strikingly undulating balconies. But ringing the park are several mediocre Loewenberg-designed high-rises such as Lancaster, a 30-story condo tower whose bowing expanses of glass have a nervous, jittery look, like the mirror-glass towers in the opening credits of the old TV show "Dallas." All glass has distortions. But this glass looks, to some eyes, like it shattered.

Once, when seeing the Lancaster from afar, Chicago architect Charles Hasbrouck said to himself: "My God, they've had some kind of accident over there."

Lakeshore East speaks to the quality gap between the profession's stars and its anonymous rank and file. It's like a baseball team that has a couple of power-hitting .300 hitters, but everybody else bats .100. You may get a home-run building here or there, but the overall quality of the architecture is anything but all-star.

Shoe-horning hurts

That same lack of skill is evident in smaller projects, such as Avenue East, the 28-story condo tower tacked onto the back of the Intercontinental.

The design, by the little-known firm of Built Form Architecture, employs its Creamsicle palette of orange-toned concrete and white metal panels -- a stab at creating a light, contemporary response to the weightiness of the eclectic old hotel. But the new building jarringly crowds the Intercontinental instead of setting it off, as a beautifully detailed glass tower would have.

This is shoe-horning, plain and simple, and the big question is why city planners allowed it without demanding better architecture.

Assefa responds that the city has established a stricter design review process since many of the offending towers were approved and that the outcome will be better architecture and urban design in

such high-profile locations as the south edge of Grant Park. He's right -- sort of.

The city's added scrutiny pushed Pappageorge/Haymes to improve its initial design for the underconstruction One Museum Park. The curvy, glassy 62-story tower at Roosevelt and the Drive already commands that corner and promises to frame Grant Park, even if it looks like something out of a Buck Rogers comic book.

But smaller buildings such as the 26-story Bernardin, designed by Antunovich Associates and named for the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, don't meet the size threshold for extensive design review.

So we face the prospect of more towers like this one, with tarted-up parking garage podiums and poorly proportioned mansard roofs. Chicago has the character to absorb such pounding. But why not insist on something more sophisticated than a 3-D cartoon?

Lessons learned?

Surely the answer does not lie solely in regulating the end product of architects' work, but in teaching them how to produce better buildings from the start.

The modernist towers of non-star firms such as Brininstool + Lynch hold lessons about the making of good buildings and civilized cityscapes. And as Ned Cramer, the editor-in-chief of Architecture magazine, wrote recently, architecture schools need to start teaching traditional design rather than teaching their students to despise it.

Finally, it wouldn't hurt for architects and developers to think about John Ruskin, the great 19th Century English critic. Ruskin penned this poetic challenge: "When we build let us think that we build forever... [L]et us think as we lay stone on stone that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hands have touched them and that men will say as they look upon the labor and the wrought substance of them, 'See! This our fathers did for us.'"

Certainly that is preferable to leaving a legacy of architectural mug shots.

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